

A Language of Wordless Communication

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SELF DISCOVERY: A PROCESS OF ATTITUDE AND APPROACH

In music, the combination of sensation and understanding which opens the doors of improvement as a process of discovery is the very backbone of real growth and development for student and professional alike. Active self-awareness and consistent review of the process of learning ensure productivity. Thinking this way means there really is no point of arrival. Instead, there are many points of departure.

Twenty years of teaching and performing, have taught me that the germinating point -- when music transforms itself into the global language of wordless communication -- can be directly linked to the attitude and approach the performer has when he practices his craft. The attitude and approach I am referring to form the concept of how the performer wants the listener to react. This forces the performer to focus on the image, thought or feeling he wants to portray. Only then can the sounds produced metamorphose into communication and that is when music becomes language and speaks to us. It requires no translation. It is accessible to every human being.

All human beings share the imaginative process that translates sound into feeling and feeling into emotion. Emotion is perhaps the most powerful of human expressions. It is a determining factor in our lives and has the potential to bring profound and long-lasting meaning to life.

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

I have always believed that being a successful student of life means you understand and accept that arrival is the plateau from which to view the next summit. For the classical music performer, there is a disparaging quirk to this seemingly rational premise. The solitude required for instrumental practice presents a consequential psychological dilemma. Reflect for a moment upon the components which create this situation. The one hour of intense instruction which is the weekly lesson, ultimately sends students to their room, left to their own devices, to apply the instructions and re-enact what they were shown during those relatively brief 60 minutes with their teacher. For many committed students, the mathematics of daily practice, say four hours per day, equate to 28 hours alone for each one hour with the teacher - a disparaging equation in any pursuit, let alone one which demands such heightened self-awareness.

Practising an instrument really is solitary confinement. Very few professionals who use their bodies to achieve perfection are required to train almost completely alone as we musicians must. There is no getting away from the fact that practice, the process of personal training for musicians, is an expected isolation accepted as being a prerequisite for development from our very earliest encounters with an instrument. For professionals like me, supposedly mature enough to no longer require the one-hour weekly assessment and analysis a teacher provides, it is assumed we have the necessary powers of self-observation to be both teacher and student, analyst and patient. This duality of roles is very difficult to achieve and almost impossible to sustain. Therefore, the assumption that we are capable of it is flawed and, I believe, is at the root of our dilemma.

Relate the solitary nature of practicing to other adult life experiences. We accept the need to seek advice from an analyst for our emotional, interactive or marital problems. We accept the need to seek advice from parents or experienced elders when we feel ill equipped to deal with problems in life. Yet how many mature musicians, those out of school and on their own, seek guidance even in the face of instrumental or professional adversity? The answer is few. The question is, why? Perhaps it has to do with whether or not we are active self-observers and have learned and are applying the skill of conceptualization.

OBSERVATION MEANS PRODUCTIVITY

Ideally, when we learn to think for ourselves and develop the ability to conceptualize, we should become aware of the enormous importance the art of self-observation plays in a continual learning process. Nevertheless, teachers rarely stress early enough that it is inherent in our professional function that we be both the coach and the coached. Success or failure at attaining this understanding early in the study process, ultimately determines the efficacy of our use of time. As time for personal practice and reflection diminishes commensurate with increasing personal and professional responsibilities (family, work, etc.), this understanding can seriously affect whether or not we realize our long-term goals.

SUPERSTARS IN SHORT PANTS

Today, more young people are playing better, at an earlier age than ever before. A recent Wall Street Journal feature article about violinist Sarah Chang (July 23, 1996) focused on how world artist management is parlaying adolescent, even pubescent, talent into commercial success. The article rightly begged the appropriateness of this increasingly common practice relative to the long-term quality of life issues of those chosen few selected for inclusion in this exclusive group. Does anybody out there care about what kind of human beings these kids will end up being after having been merchandised in this way so early in life?

One can look back in musical history for a well-documented example. Leopold Mozart commercialized his five-year-old son Wolfgang's genius, and thereby scarred him for life. Wolfgang remained a child never achieving personal happiness and fulfillment as an adult. As a result of his imbalance he could not sustain a marriage, his relations with others were always in turmoil, and he died in abject poverty pursued by self-inflicted demons.

IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY

Within the last twenty years, traditions of discipline, particularly from Asian cultures, have produced a virtual wave of perfection-driven performers who have descended upon Western music schools and performance spaces. As a result, from the point of view of note perfection in performance, instrumental music has never been more precise.

Surely much of this is driven by the priorities, even prerequisites, the world of technology and digital precision have imposed upon us -- not to criticize the marvels of modern technology, of which I am a fervent devotee! I write this article on my laptop, aboard a train between Munich and Bern. I put it through a spell check, set it up in whatever style, format or type I wish and, upon arrival, will print it out on my laser printer at eight pages per minute. Out it will come looking perfect. Except to the most discerning eye, it will be difficult to know whether the printed page was professionally typeset or published at home. However, here is the important point. -- none of this high-tech equipment assures the quality of the content or the value of the message.

IS PERFECTION A GOAL IN ITSELF?

Relate technology and the search for perfection to practicing. Instrumental students spend countless hours attempting to reproduce the precision and accuracy laser technology has graced us with via CD. Among too many, perfection appears to become the goal rather than the means with which to "speak" the language of music. For example, I would be most distraught if, in reading this article, the reader focused on the words and considered them more important than the thought and message behind them!

SEARCH FOR STYLE

A recent personal experience is a prime example of perfection being a goal in itself without attempt at finding the meaning behind the notes. As a jury member of the 1996 International Musikwettbewerb der ARD in Munich this past September, I was upset by the elimination of what I had at first thought was a talented quartet. This quartet played with razor-sharp intonation and impeccable ensemble. I was aware that much was lacking musically and stylistically (they had played the great Schubert G Major Quartet with little apparent understanding of Viennese style). However, I reasoned that, because of their youth and the short time they had been together (two years), they would become "aware" and soon meld and ultimately emerge into a most worthy group. I reasoned they warranted encouragement and that allowing them to go on to the next round would signal a belief in their future, a faith in their talent. My vote did not carry them through and so, to my initial regret, they were eliminated.

My curiosity about how they worked, what their potential was and why they played the way they did, made me seek them out. We talked about Schubert and I asked if any of them had ever listened to great performers, such as Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau or Elizabeth Schwartzkopf, sing lieder. To my surprise and shock not only had they not listened to lieder, they barely knew what lieder were. No wonder they didn't understand Schubert! Listening to lieder would have been the obvious point of departure for attaining an understanding of the 18th and 19th century Viennese style typified by Schubert -- but what an omission!

OUT OF CONTEXT

I attempted to bring this situation into a non-musical context. Thinking of music as a language I tried to compare learning to play Schubert to learning a foreign language, say Japanese, Russian or Hebrew. Could one be said to speak a language if one were able to identify and sound out each and every one of the characters or letters without seeking to understand the meaning of the words they formed? And what about the language's historical etymology? Furthermore, would one not really need to know something about the tradition behind the use of the language in order to really know how to apply it? Clearly, this quartet defined what a cultural gap can really mean. Unfortunately, their case is not unusual and, therefore, underscores the pressing need for teachers of performance to stress stylistic understanding -- a historical term of reference -- as an essential tool in the process of seeking interpretive understanding.

ISOLATED COMMUNICATION

Problem-solving, trouble-shooting, streamlining have all become the turnkey words in the analysis of productivity in business. All sectors of our increasingly competitive and complex world are looking inward, assessing resources and the efficiency of work habits in order to become more cost effective. Whether in business or private life we are all facing the same predicament: how do we **do more**, **have more** and **make more** with less.

I believe the technological revolution driving the emerging global village is putting us all in peril. We are at risk of turning our hitherto interpersonal dependence -- our communicative evolutionary process -- into a frightening oxymoron: isolated communication. We are all flocking to the computer chip, seeing in it a panacea for all our ills. Seated behind our terminals, peering intently into our monitors, pressing messages upon keyboards -- alarming numbers of us are communicating in solitude through the medium of a World Wide Web, fax or Internet. All are devoid of a most important physical criterion which previously played a fundamental and comprehensive role in governing our process of cognitive thought: our senses. Increasingly, we are being robbed of our vital senses through digitally-accessed communication: no taste, no smell, no spatial perspective, no facial expressions, no physical reactions and, most importantly for us musicians, no aural stimuli.

ARE LIVE CONCERTS DOOMED?

Statistics tell us that attendance at concerts is down and falling. Governments are cutting funding to the arts in practically all its forms. The burden of responsibility is falling ever more heavily upon corporations, foundations and the private individual. Many corporations stay away from sponsorship because they reason that the relatively small "bang for the buck" support of cultural events, makes little financial sense and, therefore, precludes their involvement. They ask, is it financially viable to invest in the arts relative to the number of people the associated publicity reaches? Qualitative concerns seem not to be a motivating consideration. In some cases it is even irrelevant. Many sponsors just want to know whether the bottom line equates -- how many of those attending a concert will be affected by their sponsorship and end up buying their product. This is a very hard position to argue. Those who may be unaware or have become desensitized, may not realize the necessity for corporations to have a profile as quality-of-life leaders. They fail to grasp the value the classical concert experience may have for them and their customer. The classical music lover and concert public tend to be a certain type -- discriminating. Finding the right marriage, corporate sponsor with an enlightened self-interest in the concert consumer to presenter of classical music, is the challenge for the concert presenter/fund-raiser of the late 1990's. Thankfully, there are still sponsors who have come to understand the value to them in their nurturing of the arts. Imagine what our lives would be like without them -- the few that care. The big question is what does this bode for the future?

S CLASSICAL MUSIC STILL RELEVANT?

Historically, the arts have always been dependent upon "help". In the 16th and 17th century, it was the church which was the principle sponsor of music. During the Renaissance, royalty and wealthy individuals expressed their individuality through support of artists and the arts, seeking the resulting status it brought them, that kept music and musicians alive. In the 19th and 20th century, government began assuming sponsorship as a civic responsibility, incorporating artistic policy within political strategy. Now, as we near the end of the 20th century, financial constraints, conflicting budgetary demands and political pressure have conspired to no longer allow government to be the cultural provider it has been. More and more, the responsibility is falling on a triumvirate of sponsors: the Corporation, the Foundation and the Patron. How will this impact upon the future for the performer and for music as a whole?

Glenn Gould was among those who prophesied the impending relegation to museum status of a classical musician's *raison d'être*: live music in concert. It was he who was the first to herald its impending demise. Why would one want to go out, brave vehicular assault and night-time personal endangerment to sit in a large impersonal space (concert hall) with hundreds of others to listen to less than perfect (by digitally-perfect CD standards) performances? One can so much more easily luxuriate in digital ecstasy, seated in a comfortable chaise longue, encased in foam cupped headphones, dressed in a jogging suit isolated from the world within the intimacy of one's own home! Is there something missing here? Can this be the future for classical music -- the listener in solitary confinement?

REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEBODY

As the gleam and seduction of the electronic toys we use wears, it is my hope that we will all long for the shared, basic human need to be *touched* -- touched in every sense of the word. Anyone who has had the experience, knows the totality an emotive physical communion with music can engender. It is ever more important for performers who recreate a union with the printed note, to know how to conceptualize, instrumentally and musically and then know how to communicate what we conceptualize -- to reach out and touch somebody. Live classical music must be an otherwise unobtainable experience for the listener if it is to survive. Musicians must be purveyors of purpose whose individuality and commitment become the reason for going to a concert, personality being the magic ingredient.

.As we all use the communicative skills life experience teaches us when we attempt to accomplish the transmission of a thought (reading, writing, listening, observing, feeling, etc.), we musicians must understand the significance of truly giving meaning to the thought behind the sounds we create. Music has always served the function of being a vivid mirror of its time -- a snapshot of customs, style, sophistication, enlightenment, habit and thought. Though wordless, it can be said to be similar to literature in this regard. When we write or speak we all struggle, with varying degrees of success, to transmit an idea. However, if we have a clear concept of what we want to say, we usually find a way to communicate it, to "say something".

Interpreting a piece of music is no more or less complex. Musicians must continue to pursue the challenge -- make classical music relevant and accessible to others -- by focusing on its communicative qualities. We musicians must not only be interpreters, we must also be communicators. We must have something to say, have the courage to be ourselves and translate our music into a meaningful message. Only then can music be a language without need of translation - truly a wordless communication.

